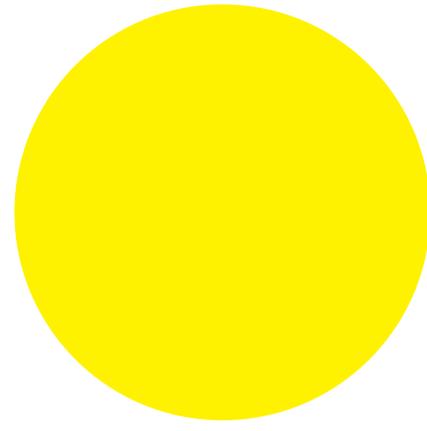


A war of destiny unfolds in Rafah
US seems unable to resolve Gaza conflict

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Golda Meir's fate awaits Netanyahu



By Mansour Barati
 Middle East affairs expert

OPINION EXCLUSIVE

The Israelis have launched a fresh wave of airstrikes on Rafah in southern Gaza and targeted Hezbollah positions in southern Lebanon. They have threatened to launch a ground assault on Rafah, which could potentially result in a dire humanitarian catastrophe in southern Gaza. International pressure urging Israel to refrain from attacking and to accept a cease-fire has thus far been futile.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu remains resolute in continuing the war as he sees his political life at risk in the aftermath of the conflict. The October 7 blitzkrieg by Hamas caught Israel off guard and dealt an irreparable blow to Netanyahu's popularity. It appears that we may witness similar circumstances to those of 1973 and the Yom Kippur War when Israel was taken by surprise.

Following the conclusion of the conflict, fact-finding committees interrogated several army chiefs and officials, including the then-prime minister, Golda Meir, and some of them faced trial. A year later, Golda Meir bid farewell to politics forever. Now, with Netanyahu's plummeting popularity, he faces a similar fate. Hence, he feels compelled to prolong the war.

However, Israel's situation on the war fronts differs. Since October 8, the Israelis have engaged in a firefight with Lebanon's Hezbollah on the northern front. Hezbollah has eroded Israel's security deterrence, as the northern regions bordering Lebanon have been evacuated for several months. Israel's recent attacks on Hezbollah's positions should be seen in the context of the Israeli army's desire to focus more on the northern front, which is expected to intensify the exchange of fire between Israel and Hezbollah. On the Gaza front, the release of two captives in Khan Yunis has heightened Israel's motivation to attack Rafah to free more prisoners. Consequently, the Israelis have declared their readiness for a ground invasion on Rafah.

Global concerns about the potential human catastrophe in the densely populated area of Rafah, with a population density of 12 people per square meter, have led to increased warnings and pressure, even from the United States and the United Kingdom, against Israel. However, such pressure has not been sufficient to compel Netanyahu to accept a cease-fire and avoid attacking Rafah. The US and the UK must escalate their pressure to halt Netanyahu from attacking Rafah.

In the meantime, efforts are underway to establish a 6-week cease-fire in Gaza, and the likelihood of a truce is higher than before. It is speculated that Israel's escalation of airstrikes on Rafah and Hezbollah aims to deliver a severe blow to the opposing side, allowing Tel Aviv to moderate Hamas' conditions at the negotiating table. Some even claim that the two prisoners released in Khan Yunis had been freed earlier, but the news was announced now to enhance the army's morale to attack Rafah. By highlighting the threat of a ground assault on Rafah, it is believed that Hamas will be coerced into compromising their conditions for a cease-fire, including the release of the captives.

Despite all these developments, the risk of a ground attack on Rafah lingers, and the international community, particularly Israel's supporters, the US and the UK, must act promptly to prevent another humanitarian disaster before it is too late.

Iran-SCO 10-month trade tops \$37b, up 5.5% in value terms

The trade exchanges between Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'s member states in the first 10 months of the current Iranian year (started March 21, 2023) topped \$37 billion.

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Palestinians walk amid the rubble of damaged buildings following Israeli bombardment in Rafah, on the southern Gaza Strip on February 12, 2024.
 SAID KHATIB/AFP

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Iran-Armenia economic commission kicks off in Tehran

The 18th meeting of the Iran-Armenia Joint Economic Commission kicked off in Tehran on Wednesday with the participation of trade and economic officials of the two countries.

It was attended by the head of the International Affairs and Public Relations Affairs of Iran's Plan and Budget Organization (PBO), Masoud Mirzaei, and secretary of the Armenian Economic Commission and acting head of the Department of Bordering Countries, Hayk Darbinyan, IRNA reported. In his address, Mirzaei termed the political relations between Tehran and Yerevan as "excellent," and said, "We believe that the level of economic relations between the two countries should be promoted in tandem with the political ties."

Iran seeks an operational road map for the expansion of trade-economic relations with the Republic of Armenia in all fields and will use all its capacities to develop its relations with its neighbor, Mirzaei emphasized. For his part, the secretary of the Armenian Economic Commission said that promoting political and economic relations with Iran has been high on the agenda of the government of Armenia.

BRICS members speeding up de-dollarization

Russia, China, and India have ditched the US dollar in 95% of their trade transactions in what is certainly a sign of growing de-dollarization efforts by the three main members of the BRICS bloc of emerging economies, a report by Watcher.guru website shows.

The report published on Wednesday quoted Secretary-General of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Tatiana Mohaghan as saying that Russia's dealings with China and India has massively shifted in favor of local currencies.

Moreover, figures by the ICC shows that Russia's export settlements in either the US dollar or the euro have also fallen from more than 85% in 2021 to just 34% last year, said the report.

BRICS member states were not shy about their de-dollarization plans last year as the bloc increased its overall usage of local currencies in bilateral trade. Russia has tried to shift its trade focus amid increased Western sanctions on its economy.

Iran-SCO 10-month trade tops \$37b, up 5.5% in value terms

The trade exchanges between Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)'s member states in the first 10 months of the current Iranian year (started March 21, 2023) topped \$37 billion.

Iran-SCO trade for 10 months to January 22, 2024 registered a 41 percent growth in volume, and a 5.5 percent growth in value compared to the same period

last year, added the spokesman of Iran's House of Industry, Mine and Trade for Trade Promotion and International Affairs Commission, IRNA reported.

Rouhollah Latifi said more than 64 million tons of non-oil goods, valued at over \$37 billion, were exchanged between Iran and 11 member states of the organization during the 10-month period.



According to the official, Iran exported 54.5 million tons of non-oil goods, valued at \$18 billion, to the member states of the SCO, showing a one percent hike in value and 48.2 percent hike in volume compared to last year's corresponding period.

In this period, Iran imported 9.7 million tons of goods, valued at more than \$19 billion, from SCO member countries, indicating a

17.9 and a 10.5 percent growth in volume and value terms, respectively, compared to last year's corresponding period, the spokesperson added.

He went on to say that Iran exported \$11.5 billion, \$1.8 billion, \$1.7 billion, \$1.5 billion, and \$760.4 million worth of products to China, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Russia, respectively. The SCO, which has its head-

quarters in China, is the world's largest regional organization in terms of area and population.

It has nine member states, namely, Iran, China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

In July 2023, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization officially approved Iran's full-fledged membership in the organization.

Iran's crude extraction from joint Azadegan oilfield to rise to 0.5 mbd: Minister

Iranian Oil Ministry has plans to increase the daily extraction of crude oil from the joint oilfield of Azadegan to 500,000 barrels per day, announced Oil Minister Javad Owji, noting that the figure currently stands at 200,000 barrels per day.

Speaking on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting in Tehran on Wednesday, the minister added that six contracts have been signed on the development of oil and gas fields, Shana reported.

Owji went on to say that contracts with a total value of

\$14 billion will be inked by March 19 to develop eight other oil and gas fields.

The Azadegan oilfield is about 80km west of the city of Ahvaz, southwestern province of Khuzestan, and along the Iran-Iraq border, covering a total area of 1,500 square kilometers. It is known to be Iran's largest joint oilfield, with about 32 billion barrels of oil in place.

Less reliance on petrodollars

Iran's oil minister said on

Tuesday the development of the tourism industry can contribute to the country's economy and reduce reliance on oil revenues.

Javad Owji made the remarks during his visit to the 17th Iran International Tourism and Related Industries Exhibition at the Tehran International Permanent Fairgrounds.

According to a Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts report, the tourism sector has witnessed a 50 percent growth in the current Iranian year (starting March 21, 2023), said the oil minister.

Tourism experts from different countries have come to Iran to visit the exhibition, Owji quoted the officials as saying.

He said the Oil Ministry has all the time supported the tourism industry, particularly in the field of social responsibility in all provinces.

The 17th Iran International Tourism and Related Industries Exhibition opened on Monday and will end today.

**Uzbekistan-Iran trade can increase to \$1b: Envoy**

Iran and Uzbekistan can increase their annual bilateral trade to \$1 billion, said Uzbek Ambassador in Tehran Fariddin Nasriyev.

Speaking on the occasion of the presence of a delegation from the tourism committee of Uzbekistan and the Bukhara regional government in Tehran to attend the 17th Iran International Tourism and Related Industries Exhibition, Nasriyev hailed the direct flights between the capitals of the two countries, which contribute to the development of tourism.

He said both countries enjoy a growing trend in relations following the meeting of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.

"Cooperation between Uzbekistan and Iran is also developing more and more. As a result of high-level visits, a memorandum was signed

on establishing direct relations between Samarkand and Isfahan, also between Bukhara and Hamedan." Speaking at the event, the head of the tourism committee of Uzbekistan, Umid Shadiev, highlighted some major actions of Uzbekistan for boosting tourism in the country and cooperation with other countries in this sector, as well as tourism potentials of his country.

He added that tourism is one of the best ways for boosting relations and the economy; it is also considered as way for strengthening friendship. He then pointed to the unprecedented actions of Uzbekistan in its tourism industry for a sustainable development of the country.

He reiterated that Iran and Uzbekistan have great potentials for cooperation in industry, and they need more active cooperation.

Iranians' travel to Malaysia up 163% in 2023: Ambassador

A total of 19,908 Iranians visited various destinations in Malaysia last year, said Malaysia's Ambassador to Iran Khairi Omar, adding that the figure was 7,500 for 2022.

Speaking at a joint press conference held in Tehran on the introduction of tourist attractions of Malaysia, the Malaysian envoy noted that the development opportunities in the tourism market between Malaysia and Iran can be based on diverse aspects including culture, history, nature, and various recreational activities.

"Modern attractions in Malaysia, like the iconic Petronas Towers, along with its beautiful islands

such as Langkawi and Penang, and the diverse culture of its friendly people, can offer enjoyable experiences for Iranian tourists," he said.

Implementing joint advertising programs between Tourism Malaysia and the Iranian travel industry players would effectively introduce tourist attractions and travel services, fostering an increase in the number of Iranian tourists to Malaysia for leisure, business, and cultural exchange, the envoy said.

Speaking at the event, Director of Tourism Malaysia Middle East Rosnah Mustafa said, encouraging collaboration between private sectors and creating incen-

tives in both countries through organizing specialized events and even joint investments can be a crucial factor in developing the travel market between Iran and her country.

"Encouraging airlines to increase the number of direct flights between the two countries, facilitating travel for tourists, engaging with Iranians via social media platforms and tourism websites with up-to-date and useful information for tourists in Persian are among other factors that can be beneficial for the development of travel between the two countries," she added.

Promoting cultural exchange programs among students, art-

ists, and individuals active in various fields to establish cultural connections and experiential exchanges were mentioned by Mustafa.

In the press conference, Head of

Tehran Travel Agencies Association Amir-Pooyan Rafiee-Shad and Sales Manager of Air Arabia in Tehran Ashkan Shahsavari answered questions from reporters.



Monabat-kari, timeless art of Persian marquetry



● sazokar.com



● sazokar.com



● atabakshop.ir/REUTERS

Iranica Desk

Marquetry, known as *monabat-kari* in Persian, stands as a testament to the rich tapestry of Persian artistic heritage, showcasing the intricate beauty and meticulous craftsmanship that has been a hallmark of Iranian culture for centuries. This traditional art form involves the creation of elaborate patterns and images by inlaying pieces of wood, bone, metal, and mother-of-pearl into a wooden substrate, producing objects of exquisite beauty and complexity. The resulting works are not only decorative but deeply symbolic, reflecting the Persian aesthetic of unity, harmony, and the interplay of nature and artistry. In Iran, monabat-kari is more than just a craft; it is a cultural emblem that embodies the creativity, patience, and skill of its artisans. The art has been passed down through generations, evolving with time yet steadfastly preserving its traditional essence. It graces everything from furniture and wooden panels to

smaller items like jewelry boxes and picture frames, making it an integral part of Iranian interior design and architectural ornamentation. aadatrent.com wrote.

The significance of monabat-kari in Iranian culture extends beyond its visual appeal. It represents a deep-rooted appreciation for beauty and detail, a testament to the country's long history of artisanship in various domains, including carpet weaving, tile work, and calligraphy. Monabat-kari, with its intricate designs and meticulous execution, stands as a symbol of the enduring spirit of Iranian craftsmanship, reflecting the country's rich artistic legacy and its ongoing dialogue between tradition and innovation.

Historical background

The art of monabat-kari has deep roots in Persian history, tracing back to the ancient civilizations that flourished in the region now known as Iran. Its origins are intertwined with the broader tradition of woodwork-

ing and decorative arts that have been a significant part of Persian culture for millennia. Initially, the craft was simpler, focusing on the functional aspects of woodworking, but it evolved over time into a more intricate and artistic endeavor, reflecting the sophisticated aesthetic sensibilities of the Persian people.

Early beginnings

The earliest evidence of monabat-kari in Iran dates back to the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BCE), where woodwork and inlay techniques were used to decorate palaces and ceremonial objects. These ancient techniques laid the groundwork for the development of marquetry, showcasing the Persian artisans' skill in working with various materials to create detailed decorative patterns.

Golden ages of Persian art

The craft reached new heights during the Islamic Golden Age (8th to 14th century), a period marked by significant advancements in art, science, and cul-

ture across the Muslim world. During this time, monabat-kari became more sophisticated, incorporating Islamic geometric patterns, arabesques, and calligraphy into its designs. The Mongol invasion and the establishment of the Ilkhanate in the 13th century introduced Chinese and East Asian motifs into Persian art, including monabat-kari, leading to a fusion of styles and techniques.

Safavid era innovations

The Safavid Dynasty (1501-1722) is often regarded as the pinnacle of Persian art and culture, with monabat-kari flourishing alongside other decorative arts such as tile work, manuscript illumination, and carpet weaving. The Safavids were great patrons of the arts, and their courts were centers of artistic innovation. During this period, monabat-kari artisans began to experiment with more complex designs and a wider variety of materials, including rare woods and precious metals, reflecting the era's opulence and sophistication.

Continuity and change in the modern era

Throughout the Qajar Dynasty (1789-1925) and into the modern era, monabat-kari continued to be a cherished art form, although it faced challenges due to industrialization and changing tastes. Artisans adapted by incorporating modern themes and techniques, while still preserving the traditional craftsmanship and designs that define the art.

Contemporary revival

Today, there is a renewed interest in traditional Persian crafts, including monabat-kari as part of a broader cultural revival that values heritage and authenticity. Artisans and workshops across Iran are keeping the tradition alive, blending historical motifs with contemporary designs, and ensuring that the rich legacy of monabat-kari continues to evolve and thrive.

The history of monabat-kari is a reflection of Iran's rich cultural tapestry, showcasing the adaptability and creativity of Persian artisans through the ages. From

its humble beginnings to its current status as a symbol of Persian artistry, monabat-kari remains a vibrant and integral part of Iran's artistic heritage.

Monabat-kari is a meticulous and delicate process that elevates ordinary materials into exquisite pieces of art. This craft is a testament to the patience, precision, and creativity of the artisans who practice it. From selecting the right materials to applying the finishing touches, each step in the process is carried out with the utmost care and attention to detail.

Beyond being a display of technical skill, monabat-kari is a medium through which Persian culture and philosophical ideas are expressed. The choice of patterns and materials, along with the intricacy of the work, reflect the artisan's mastery and the rich tapestry of meanings embedded in Persian art. Through monabat-kari, artisans continue to preserve and celebrate Iran's cultural heritage, creating pieces that are both aesthetically pleasing and deeply meaningful.

Cantor Church: A historical Orthodox landmark in Qazvin



● borna.news



● eligasht.com



● eligasht

Iranica Desk

Qazvin, the capital city of north-central province of Qazvin, is a city with a wealth of historical buildings, making it a prime destination for tourists. Among its many attractions, you will find the beautiful Cantor Church, also known as the Bell Tower.

Situated in the southern part of Moshir Park, or Laleh Park, near Ayatollah Taleghani Bou-

levard, this church dates back to the Pahlavi era and is one of the few Orthodox churches in Iran. It holds a prominent place on Iran's National Heritage List. Cantor Church is the third smallest church in the world. It was constructed during the Russian occupation of Iran in World War II. After the Russians left, the church remained unoccupied. As Orthodox Christians are not residents of Iran, the building is now preserved

and maintained as a historical monument. Inside, visitors can find several showcases selling handmade jewelry and other handicrafts.

Qazvin is also home to two other active churches used by Christians and Armenians for their ceremonies, though they are not open to the public. Cantor Church features an entrance adorned with Russian crosses on both sides of the walls. Above the entrance,

there is a three-story bell tower that leads to a small dome.

Cantor Church is a small church with a four-sided plan and two domes. The larger dome is situated in the center of the prayer hall, while the smaller dome is positioned above the apse. The structure is built using brick and mortar, with the bricks meticulously arranged, resulting in a beautiful architectural design. The entrance to Cantor Church is located on the west-

ern side, featuring an entrance space with a sloping roof and a door.

In the church's courtyard there are two tombstones, one belonging to a Russian pilot and the other to a Russian engineer, who lost their lives in Iran.

Upon entering, there is a front hall with a bell tower standing at approximately eleven meters high. The hall encompasses the prayer hall and the apse,

with two rectangular spaces on either side. The apse space is semi-circular, and a dome is positioned above it.

The prayer hall is topped with a dome, while its adjacent spaces are covered with flat roofs. Decorative columns can be observed in the exterior of the church.

Additionally, there are two rooms in the church, one on each side, with one designated for the priest to change clothes.



A war of destiny unfolds in Rafah

US seems unable to resolve Gaza conflict

Palestinians look at the destruction after an Israeli airstrike in Rafah, Gaza Strip, on February 9, 2024. [FATIMA SHBAIR/AP](#)

By Ebrahim Beheshti
Staff writer

INTERVIEW

The war in Gaza has dragged on beyond expectations, defying efforts to reach a cease-fire. Plans for peace are purportedly in motion. However, the belligerent Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is gearing up to launch an assault on Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. This attack has sparked grave concerns about the potential humanitarian catastrophe awaiting Rafah. In light of this, Iran Daily interviewed Mostafa Moslehzadeh, the former Iranian ambassador to Jordan.

IRAN DAILY: Few foresaw the protracted duration of the war in Gaza. What, in your opinion, has contributed to its continuation?

MOSLEHZADEH: The war in Gaza must be understood within the context of international circumstances, a topic that demands a comprehensive discussion. However, what alarms both Israel and Hamas is the notion that this recent conflict is one of destiny — a war unlike any previous encounters between the two. This realization has dawned upon both sides. To draw an analogy from the world of football, this war has transformed into a sudden-death match with only one victor. While the losing side will not face annihilation, it will be rendered ineffectual on the international and even regional stage. For instance, should Israel lose this war, it will forfeit its strategic standing among other regional and international actors. Other states will perceive maintaining or severing ties with such a weak cabinet as inconsequential. Consequently, neither Hamas nor Israel can accept the fate of elimination. This is why the war has endured.

Does this imply that the significance of this “war of destiny” has hindered the success of negotiations and various peace plans? Do the parties consider any peace proposal that does not align with their conditions as tantamount to losing in this “war of destiny”?

Yes, indeed. The negotiating strategy employed by parties engaging with Hamas, be it the French, Qataris, or Americans, revolves around implementing the American plan as the ultimate solution. At the core of the American plan lies an inescapable destiny for Hamas: destruction and elimination — or, at the very least, uncertainty. The Americans advocate for a cease-fire, the release of Israeli captives, and increased aid to the people of Gaza. However, they remain silent on the future of Gaza and Hamas. Their intentions and objectives are apparent. They seek to eradicate Hamas. In a plan of this nature, Gaza will not revert to its pre-war status.

The Americans are ostensibly pressuring Israel to accept a cease-fire



and peace plan, a plan that prominently features the recognition of an independent Palestinian state. Will Israel’s authorities embrace such a proposal?

No, Israel will not endorse the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The claims made by the US and the UK that they will accept the establishment of a Palestinian state are also deceptive. The Americans made a promise to form a Palestinian government 30 years ago during the Oslo and Camp David agreements, but they have yet to follow up on their promise. Whenever America and Europe perceive a threat from resistance groups, they raise the issue once again. Even now, it appears that the American plan, centered around the creation of a Palestinian state, serves as leverage to remove Hamas from the Palestinian equation.

During the last four months, the people of Gaza have suffered a staggering loss of lives and money. If the plan for peace and the formation of a Palestinian government is earnest, how would the Palestinian people, both in Gaza and the West Bank, react to it?

As a general rule, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, encompassing the West Bank and Gaza, hinges on an election. Even though a national election was held previously in 2006, it did not foster unity among Palestinians and rather led to a division between Fatah and Hamas. Both the process of negotiation for peace and the electoral process have been experienced in Palestine, yet neither has resulted in a resolution for Palestine. Thus, even if both negotiation support-

ers and resistance supporters agree to the peace plan, the divide between Palestinians will persist. These plans are essentially along the same lines as previous plans that ended in stalemate, with the primary goal being the elimination of Hamas and the resistance.

Some international relations experts, on the contrary, believe that the United States is trying to resolve the issue of Israel and the Arabs in order to get ready to face its main rival, China, as well as Russia more seriously. That is why, the argument continues, the Americans are trying to force Israel to accept the peace plan and form a Palestinian government.

This is a broader analysis, but the motivation for the United States in the Middle East is not solely to eliminate uncertainty surrounding the Palestinian issue. Of course, it is not that Washington doesn't desire resolution, but that it lacks the capability to achieve it. The United States has lost its ability to solve international and regional conflicts. Over the past 30 years, numerous plans have been attempted to end this problem, but none have succeeded. America lacks the capacity to resolve the issue and yet finds itself compelled to engage in this game or war of destiny. Israel, Europe, and the United States align on one side of the Gaza conflict, while Hamas and the axis of resistance stand on the other side. Both factions are doing their utmost to avoid losing this war.

On the battlefield, a new concern is Israel’s ground attack on Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, which is expected to create an inhumane situation. Would this be the last stage of this “war of destiny” if Israel attacks Rafah?

It appears that Rafah represents the final stage of this game of fate. Israel and America have brought forth all their resources to the field. Initially, they believed that by destroying northern Gaza, Hamas would surrender, and the game would conclude, but that did not happen. Subsequently, they thought that obliterating the central areas and continuing the genocide would end the game, which, once again, proved futile. Now, they may be contemplating

that destroying the southern regions and persisting with the genocide will lead to the destruction or surrender of Hamas.

However, will Israel achieve its desired outcome of Hamas's demise and a conclusive victory? Only the future can tell. Personally, I predict that not only such an outcome will not be achieved, but also that it would not be favorable for Israel. Up until this point, when a relatively safe area existed in the south of Gaza, Israel's crimes provoked numerous condemnations worldwide. From street demonstrations and campaigns for supporting Palestine to filing lawsuits at the International Court of Justice, these crimes have irreversibly damaged the reputation of Israel and America. If Israel proceeds to attack Rafah and continue the genocide, it will signify the death of their dignity.

If Israel attacks Rafah, it will most likely repeat its previous crimes and establish military dominance there. In such a situation, would a peace plan be imposed on the Palestinian people, and would it be sustainable?

This is the preferred scenario of Israel and America. They aim to prolong the war and either destroy or dismantle Hamas while imposing their peace plan on the Palestinians, as you mentioned. However, another scenario can unfold in this war of destiny. If Israel launches a ground attack on Rafah and continues the genocide, with Gaza's inhabitants lacking any safe havens and Egypt preventing Palestinians from entering its territory, it will trigger a global process that will ultimately drag Israel into a major crisis. Assuming that Israel's actions in Gaza have thus far escalated the humanitarian crisis there to a hypothetical degree of 10, an attack on Rafah would elevate this crisis to a hypothetical degree of 20. The world does not possess the capacity to accept and stomach such a grave human crisis, which would consequently reshape international relations. Therefore, in the final stage of this fateful war, if Israel proceeds with a ground attack on Rafah, it will resemble a boomerang that swiftly returns, inflicting a blow on Israel itself that would be much heavier than previous blows.

The US could stop the horror in Rafah today

Why won't it?



By Paul Rogers
Emeritus professor
of peace studies

OPINION

Despite the pressure coming from the Biden administration, there is little sign of the Netanyahu cabinet changing its plan to destroy Hamas — whatever the cost in death and

destruction in Gaza.

The immediate risk is to the city of Rafah, where Israel is launching intensive airstrikes and planning a full ground offensive. Rafah and its immediate surroundings are sheltering about 1.5 million people, many of them in flimsy tents, while food and clean water are scarce and medical support is minimal. Warning of a ground assault, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk described it as “terrifying, given the prospect that an extremely high number of civilians, again mostly children and women, will likely be killed and injured”. On Monday, at least 67 Palestinians were killed in airstrikes on Rafah, which coincided with an Israeli mission to free two captives.

Further horror in Rafah could be averted if the United States stepped in. Israel is hugely dependent on US military support and could not continue the war for long without it. This raises two core questions: Why is Israel determined to continue with a military operation that has the potential to cause appalling civilian casualties? And why won't Joe Biden pull the plug?

The first is rather easier to answer. The Hamas assault on October 7 shook Israeli society to the core, as it was intended to do. After the second intifada between 2000 and 2005, Israel had really thought it was in full control of its security. But on October 7, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), police, and intelligence agencies all got it grievously wrong.

The Hamas paramilitary leadership had planned the attack over many months and anticipated a massive Israeli response. This is what it got, resulting in damage to Israeli attempts to work with Gulf regimes and massive support for the Palestinian cause across the Middle East and beyond.

Meanwhile, Israel has the most hawkish cabinet in 75 years, with its unsteady coalition reliant on three fundamentalist parties. But if Hamas remains active, the far-right parties will most likely withdraw support, and Benjamin Netanyahu will not survive. The prime minister's desire to continue in his role is enough to ensure that Israel's assault continues.

The IDF also has an interest in continuing this war. Its military failures have seen its status diminished across the Middle East, and its leadership knows this can best be regained by some kind of victory. The problem for the IDF leaders and Netanyahu is that the war is still not going according to plan. The IDF death toll may still be in the low hundreds, but more than a thousand troops have been seriously wounded, many of them with life-changing injuries.

Even now, Hamas is reconstituting paramilitary units in northern Gaza, which for months the IDF has claimed to be in control of. On Sunday, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) reportedly mortared Israeli military positions east of Gaza City, while the Palestinian Mujahideen Movement fired rockets toward an Israeli position southeast of the city. These attacks may be much smaller than at the start of the war, but they show that Hamas is far more flexible than expected. Even now, the IDF has still not mapped most of the Hamas tunnel network, nor has it been able to free more than three of the 100-plus captives remaining.

Meanwhile, what of the other

question: the position of the Biden administration? There may be increasingly strong messages directed at Netanyahu to limit the Palestinian losses, but they have been to little avail. It's as if the Israelis know they can ignore Biden without consequence.

The Israel lobby is certainly very strong in Washington, and the Pentagon connections with Israel are deep. They were greatly strengthened when Israeli advice was sought as the Iraq war went so wrong in 2003, and even now, US forces are permanently based in Israel, running a key X-band radar early warning facility. The US later helped to build Baladiah, a permanent Arab “town” for military training. The flow of hardware through to Israel at present is massive, and highly profitable for the US military industrial machine.

The main Israeli lobby group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), is very effective, but there are also American Jewish organisations, such as the J Street group in Washington, that are very unhappy about the direction of the war. What remains missing from an understanding of Biden's position is the benefit Israel gains from the support of Christian Zionists in the US.

Of about 100 million evangelical Christians in the US, a substantial minority do hold fast to the belief that Israel is an essential part of the Christian God's plan for the end times. Some believe that it will be in the land of Israel that the final battle will be fought between good and evil and that it is part of God's plan for Israel to be a Jewish state. Evangelical Christians are more likely to vote than others, and Christian Zionists are more likely to vote Republican. That alone bodes ill for an early end to the war — which makes it all the more important for US allies to speak some truth to power.

This is barely starting. David Cameron says that Israel “should stop and think seriously” before taking further action in Rafah, and the EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell has hinted that the US should rethink military assistance to Israel. But much more will be needed, and quickly, if an even greater disaster is to be prevented.

The article first appeared on *The Guardian*.



US President Joe Biden (L) listens on, as Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks during their meeting in Tel Aviv on October 18, 2023.
AFP

Does Netanyahu have the nerve for military operation in Rafah?

Or is it a ruse to achieve other goals?



By Dominic Waghorn
International affairs
editor at Sky News

OPINION

Is Israel about to go into Rafah, and will it be a manoeuvre too far?

There is certainly a huge amount of talk about it. But is it all talk? Does the Israeli prime minister have the nerve to go ahead or is it a ruse to achieve other goals? Rafah is important to Israeli ambitions in Gaza — it is the area directly adjacent to the border with Egypt.

That's significant for a number of reasons. The ground below is riddled with tunnels that are the only way for Hamas to smuggle weapons, apart from the sea.

Above ground, it is now where a huge number of displaced Palestinians have moved to in order to escape the fighting.

A military operation there will kill a lot more of them on top of the thousands already dead — it's thought there are at least 10,000 children among them.

But it is also where a lot of Hamas fighters and commanders are believed to be holed up.

There is a military logic, therefore, to going into Rafah, but the diplomatic fallout will be immense.

The White House says it would be “disastrous” in its currently planned form, the UK has warned Israel to think twice, and Egypt has threatened to suspend its decades-long peace agreement with Israel if it follows through with the plan.

Reports from Israel suggest the operation is not yet imminent.

This is primarily based on the estimated troops' strength likely to be required for such a manoeuvre. Reserve units that have been sent home in recent days would need to be replaced, and that takes time.

There is also speculation that the threat to go into Rafah is a ruse. Benjamin Netanyahu is a wily operator. He knows acting big against American pressure plays well with his voters.

It's a tactic he has employed time and time again, and he desperately needs



The large-scale map shows the Rafah Governorate in the southern Gaza Strip and its population as of February 12, 2024.
OCHA

shoring up in polls that show him to be deeply unpopular.

Other commentators in Israel suggest he is looking for an excuse, an alibi, someone to blame when he has to end the Gaza operation without securing the total victory he has promised throughout this war.

“I desperately wanted to cut off the head of the snake in Rafah,” he could tell Israelis. “But our American patrons and allies in the region made that impossible.”

This would be a familiar manoeuvre from him too.

This could also just be psychological warfare. The Israelis have desperately wanted to claim a scalp, the death or capture of a key Hamas

commander, but they have slipped through their hands like Gazan sand at every turn.

Threatening to move in on Rafah puts pressure on the likes of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar and may be an effort to flush him out of his cover.

As ever in any Middle Eastern war, all is not what it seems.

Israel may have a plan for Rafah and could be testing the water, or it may be opting for tactics and psyops instead. Either way, the truth for the civilians of Gaza trapped in this wretched war with little food, aid, or shelter is more terrifying uncertainty over where the bombs will fall next.

The article first appeared on *Sky News*.

Persian Gulf Pro League:

Tehran archrivals to resume title race

Sports Desk

The excitement is back in the Iranian club football as the top-flight sides will begin the second half of the Persian Gulf Pro League season today and tomorrow following a six-week Asian Cup pause.

While the game between Tractor and Sepahan – fourth and second in the table respectively – has been postponed due to the latter's involvement in the AFC Champions League last 16, Tehran archrivals Esteghlal and Persepolis will resume what will presumably be a fourth-horse title race going down the wire.

League leader Esteghlal will be looking to build on a perfect home record in the ongoing campaign when hosting struggling San'at Naft Abadan – third from bottom in the table – at the Azadi Stadium on Friday. However, the buildup to the game has been dominated by yet another public feud between Blues head coach Javad Nekounam and club chairman Ali Khatir over a quiet midseason transfer window.

Nekounam had some high-profile names in his

wish list, including Iranian internationals Alireza Jahanbakhsh, Ali Qolizadeh, and Saeid Ezzatollahi, but was eventually left with the addition of Brazilian center-back Raphael Silva, rejoining the Blues only six months after parting ways with the club, and Uzbek winger Jaloliddin Masharipov from Greek club Panserraikos.

The game will be a first for new San'at manager Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh – a former Iran and Esteghlal defender who replaced Abdollah Veisi and is tasked with steering the southern Iranian club in another familiar battle for survival.

New-look Reds

A lot has changed for the defending champion Persepolis since the last game before the hiatus – a 1-1 away draw at Mes Rafsanjan.

Yahya Golmohammadi, who had his own dispute with the club hierarchy, stepped down from his role to end a trophy-laden four years on the Reds bench.

The Reds' approach for ex-Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic ended in vain and Brazilian Osmar Loss Vieira, a No. 2 to Golmohammadi,

was handed the job for the rest of the campaign.

Osmar's first test comes away to Iralco today in Arak against Mojtaba Hosseini – also a former assistant to Golmohammadi.

Trailing Esteghlal by two points, third-place Persepolis had to part ways with Milad Sarlak and Mohammad Omri but made some marquee signings during the winter break in Qatari fullback Abdulkarim Hassan and Uzbekistani international midfielder Oston Urunov, as well as striker Issa Alekasir, who had left the club to join Sepahan in the summer.

The game, however, is likely to come too soon for the trio as Persepolis failed to register their contracts in time due to a FIFA transfer ban. Elsewhere, fifth-placed Zob Ahan will host Malavan FC – sixth in the table – today in a match that could see the winner join the title race, while Shams Azar, the surprise package of the season, welcomes bottom-side Esteghlal Khuzestan.

Moharram Navidkia will begin a new chapter in his career as the Mes Rafsanjan coach at home against Masoud Shojaei's Havadar.



PAYAM SANI/IRNA

Iran wins women's title at Taekwondo Fajr Open



PARNIAN MADADI/taekwondo.ir

Sports Desk

Iranian women's team picked up where it left off on Day 1 of the Taekwondo Fajr Open in Tehran by collecting another 11 medals, including three golds.

Tuesday's results saw the Iranian girls lift the champion's trophy – thanks to seven golds and silvers apiece, as well as 11 bronzes – with Armenia and Kazakhstan in the following spots respectively.

"A number of the national team members were absent in the event, but up-and-coming faces broke through and showcased their enthusiasm in some thrilling bouts," Iran head coach Mino Maddah said, adding: "There was little to separate the contestants and even high-profile participants like Nahid Kiani and Mobina Ne'matzadeh knew they couldn't afford to underestimate any opponent."

Reigning world champion Kiani, who has secured a berth at the Paris Olympics, headlined the Iranians' campaign on Day 2, defeating Kazakhstan's Mariya Sevostyanova for the -57kg gold, with Aida Khorshidi and Sara Mizban bagging double bronzes for the host.

"It was tough bout in the final but I'm here to prepare for the Olympics and fix my weak points," said Kiani, adding she would also take part in the upcoming World Taekwondo President's Cup as well as the Asian Taekwondo Clubs Championships, which will follow the Fajr Open in the Iranian capital until February 22.

Elsewhere, Maryam Malakou-tikhah came out on top against Sogol Shiri in an all-Iranian -49kg final, while their compatriot Parimah Changi settled for a consolation bronze alongside Botakoz Kapanova of Kazakhstan. Armenian Urganavaeva Nina came

out victorious against the host's Yalda Valinejad to walk away with the gold in the -67kg contests before being awarded the MVP prize in the women's competitions. Iranian Fereshteh Fat'hi and Kazakhstan's Kamila Aimukasheva shared the third podium of the weight class.

Nioush Shadlou rounded off a remarkable run for the Iranian girls by defeating teammate Zeinab Asadi in the +73kg final, and Hadis Eslamifard won a joint bronze along with Munira Abdusalomova of Tajikistan. Ma'soumeh Ranjbar (-46kg), Ghazal Soltani (-53kg), Asma Sedaqat (-62kg), and Elham Haqiqi (-73kg) had made a clean sweep of four golds for Iran on the opening day of the competition's 33rd edition, which will finish with the conclusion of the men's event today in the Iranian capital's Taekwondo House.

Injuries take shine off Manchester City victory for Guardiola

PA MEDIA – Pep Guardiola was left to rue injuries to Jack Grealish and Bernardo Silva after Manchester City returned to Champions League action with a 3-1 win at FC Copenhagen on Tuesday. Grealish, handed his first start in six matches, lasted just 21 minutes of the holders' largely straightforward last-16 first-leg success at Parken Stadium before being forced off with a groin injury. Silva, who put City into a 2-1 lead just before the break with a fine flicked finish, took a knock to the ankle late in the game. The double blow comes after Josko Gvardiol missed the game with an ankle injury and Mateo Kovacic was also unavailable. City manager Guardiola said:

"It's something muscular with Jack, his groin.

"He felt it on the grass, started to complain. The players can feel it immediately if it's muscular. It's a pity, he's gutted.

"He wanted to continue but we didn't want to make the damage even worse. We'll make tests tomorrow.

"Bernardo has a big knock in his ankle and Josko is out two to three weeks. Kova is ready to come back."

The injuries took the gloss off what was a mainly comfortable night for City.

They took an early lead through Kevin De Bruyne and, dominant in all departments, should have led by more before Magnus Mattsson levelled after an Ederson error.

Silva restored the lead and Phil Foden gave the scoreline

a more realistic look in stoppage time.

Guardiola said: "It was really, really good. I'm so proud we played at that tempo. It was perfect.

"We were patient in the right moments but it's not done. I know how difficult it is.

"It's not decisive but a good result. Hopefully we can finish at home in front of our own people and go to the next round."

Danish champions Copenhagen had not played competitively for two months due to their league's winter break and their rustiness was evident.

Coach Jacob Neestrup said: "Of course it's going to be difficult, but now we have three games in the Danish league where we need to get results. Then we take the away game, where we try to do our very, very best."



Manchester City's Bernardo Silva (c) is seen in action against FC Copenhagen in the UEFA Champions League last 16 before a late injury at the Parken Stadium, Copenhagen, Denmark, on February 13, 2024.
ZAC GOODWIN/PA

Schism in EU

Spain, Ireland call for 'urgent review' of EU-Israel agreement over human rights in Gaza

International Desk Spain and Ireland have asked the European Commission to "undertake an urgent review" of the EU-Israel agreement over worsening human rights situation in Gaza in the wake of Israel's onslaught on the Palestinian territory.

In a letter to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, both countries have expressed deep concern at the deteriorating situation in Gaza and seeking an "urgent review" of whether Israel is complying with human rights obligations under its trade agreement with the European Union.

The letter from Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez also asked that the commission propose "appropriate measures" that could be taken if Israel is found to be in breach of the obligations in the EU/Israel Association Agreement.

Rafah ground invasion

The request from the European Commission comes amid fears that Israel will launch a ground invasion of Rafah where more than a million Palestinian refugees are taking shelter from the ongoing war.

The Irish Times reported earlier this month that Ireland was seeking the support of fellow EU member states for a review of the trade agreement with Israel.

The two leaders wrote that they are "deeply concerned at the deteriorating situation in Israel and in Gaza, especially the impact the ongoing conflict is having on innocent Palestinians, especially children and women."

They added that the expanded Israeli military operation in the Rafah area poses a grave and imminent threat that the international community must urgently confront.

When several Western countries froze their funding for the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) after Israel last month claimed that 12 staff members of the UN organization were involved in Hamas's October 7 attack, Spain and Portugal decided to go in the opposite direction. They responded with promises to raise their funding. For years, but especially in the past few months, they have been part of a grouping of countries across Europe that have consistently sought to strike a different note when it comes to conflict in the Middle East. Others include Ireland, which has called for a review of the EU's treaties with Israel, and Slovenia, which said it expected Israel to swiftly implement provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice in a case looking into allegations of genocide.

'Gazans staring death in face'

A top UN official declared that "a million Gazans are staring death in the face" and warned catastrophic human consequences could occur should Israel press on with an assault on the city of Rafah.

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin

Griffiths said the Palestinian people have been subjected to an "assault that is unparalleled in its intensity, brutality and scope" following months of incessant bombing by Israeli forces.

But now he believes an Israeli invasion of Rafah – a town in the southern Gaza Strip, where huge numbers

of Palestinians have fled to escape Tel-Aviv's bombing campaigns – would "leave an already fragile humanitarian operation at death's door" and lead to a "slaughter".

Since October 7, Israel's strikes on Gaza have killed more than 28,000 people, mostly women and children.



Iran's judiciary chief: Muslim world should stand up against Israel

Iran's judiciary chief called on the Islamic world to stand up against Israel and use all leverage available to stop its "war machine" in the Gaza Strip.

"The entire Islamic world must stand up against the Zionist war machine and it is necessary to activate all levers to stop the Zionists' ferocious and blind killings in Gaza," Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejeie said in a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani in Baghdad on Wednesday, IRNA reported.

He also stressed the need for the full implementation of a security agreement that Iran signed with Iraq last March to combat the threat of terrorism.

The Iraqi prime minister expressed his government's willingness to strengthen cooperation with Iran in all areas, and detailed the steps that have been taken to implement the joint projects between the two countries.

Iran, Afghanistan discuss border issues



National Desk

Taliban's Defense Ministry said Iranian and Afghan officials discussed issues related to the common border and bilateral relations between the two neighboring countries.

Taliban's Defense Ministry in a post on its X account on Wednesday said the coordination meeting was held at Islam Qala crossing in Afghanistan's eastern province of Herat.

According to the statement, Taliban officials assured the Iranian side that they are ready for any joint cooperation and establishing good relations with the neighboring countries.

The ministry added that the Iranian delegation expressed its satisfaction with the cooperation of Afghan border guards with the Iranian side.

Since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban group in 2021, several clashes have erupted between the countries' border guards over different issues.

In May 2023, two Iranian border guards and one Taliban fighter were killed after a shooting broke out near a border post between Iran and Afghanistan.

Campaigning begins in Iran for Assembly of Experts elections

Candidates running for seats in Iran's Assembly of Experts began election campaigns on Wednesday.

Members of the assembly are directly elected to office by the people for an eight-year term. The body holds biannual meetings to review major national issues and every other year to appoint a new chairman.

The Assembly of Experts is tasked with electing, supervising

and, if necessary, dismissing the leader of the Islamic Revolution. IRNA reported on Wednesday that the "elections campaign for the Assembly of Experts began today and will last for 15 days".

A total of 500 hopefuls submitted applications for membership in the 88-member assembly, although jurists in charge of vetting the candidates only approved 144.

The elections for the assem-

bly, which are held every eight years, will take place on March 1 along with the parliamentary elections.

The assembly is currently headed by the 96-year-old Ahmad Jannati.

In January, Iran's former president Hassan Rouhani said after 24 years of membership he had been barred from seeking re-election to the Assembly of Experts.



People walk past a campaign banner for the 2024 Iranian elections scheduled for March 1, on a main road in central Tehran on February 14, 2024. **● ATTA KENARE/ AFP**

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



Blast hits major gas transmission pipelines in southern Iran

Two explosions struck gas pipelines in Iran early Wednesday in an act of "terrorism and sabotage" that disrupted gas supplies in three of the country's provinces.

"This act of terrorism and sabotage was carried out in two locations at around 1 a.m.," National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) manager Saeed Aghli said, according to Shana News Agency.

The saboteurs hit pipelines in the cities of Borujen in the southwestern province of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, and Safashahr in the southern province of Fars, Aghli said, adding that there were no casualties in the explosions or the ensuing fires.

The sabotage disrupted gas supplies in at least three provinces – North Khorasan in the northeast, Lorestan in the

west, and Zanjan in the northwest. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji also confirmed the attacks, saying the attacks caused a massive explosion and a subsequent fire.

Speaking on the sidelines of a cabinet session in the capital Tehran on Wednesday, Owji said that saboteurs blew up the transmission lines at around 1 a.m. local time on Wednesday (2130 GMT Tuesday).

He said that the NIGC has well managed to bring the situation under control.

The Iranian oil minister highlighted that repair work on the affected pipelines is underway, and hopefully the flow on the pipelines will resume within 12-14 hours.

Iranian artists upstage int'l musicians



Hojjat Ashrafzadeh
● YJC



Indian ensemble
● ISNA



Uzbek ensemble
● IRNA



Arts & Culture Desk

Musicians from India, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan who performed at the second night of the 39th Fajr International Music Festival on February 13 could not attract as many audiences as Iranian vocalist Hojjat Ashrafzadeh did. The program began at Vahdat Hall with all-female music group Nushe attracting the female audience of Tehran, ana.ir reported. In Vahdat Hall, the first performance by the Indian Rajasthani ensemble, led by Rahis Bharti, failed to engage a considerable audience despite rhythmic

and traditional Rajasthani music pieces. Bharti expressed his desire for global harmony through music, emphasizing the unity of the musical community worldwide. At Rudaki Hall, the international performances were not warmly received. The first section by Uzbek artist Abrar Zufarov, showcasing the cultural wedding repertoire 'Nihar Ash,' did not resonate well with the Iranian audience. Following Zufarov, Tajik artist Sardar Suliev performed, blending traditional Tajik instruments and vocals. Suleev's performance also struggled to

attract the audience. The highlight of the night emerged at the second section of the performances at Vahdat Hall when Iranian musician Hojjat Ashrafzadeh performed. His performances including 'To Nafasi' and 'Halam Khobe Ba To' got the kudos. Expressing gratitude to the audience, Ashrafzadeh stated, "It's an honor to sing for my beloved family in this magnificent hall on the most romantic day. A mother is the only being worthy of worship after God, and tonight, I sing with love for my mother." Ashrafzadeh also highlight-

ed the value of Iranian local music, taking the audience on a journey through various regions' musical richness. Before performing the local piece 'Dorna,' he paid homage to the late Mohammadreza Shajarian, recalling the track's earlier performance in Shajarian's album 'Night, Silence, Desert.' The 39th Fajr International Music Festival opened on February 12 and will run through February 17. The event will be held in Tehran and 14 other provinces simultaneously. The seven venues in Tehran host more than 70 perfor-

mances and over 330 stage performances will be held in 14 provinces including East Azerbaijan, Bushehr, Semnan, Fars, Golestan, Markazi, Mazandaran, North Khorasan, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad, Khuzestan, Kermanshah, Lorestan, Kerman, and Hormozgan. Organized by the Music Office of the Deputy for Artistic Affairs of Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the festival encompasses various sections such as the competitive (Barbad Award), non-competitive, and research sessions.

Promotion of Muslim unity goal of Iran Int'l Qur'an competition: Official

The head of the organizing committee of Iran's 40th International Qur'an Competition referred to promotion of Islamic unity as one of the main goals of the Qur'anic event.

Speaking to reporters at a press conference in Tehran on Wednesday, Hamid Majidimehr said when it comes to the Holy Qur'an, there are no differences among different groups of Muslims. He said the development of the rich culture of reading and recitation of the Qur'an and contemplating its teachings and enhancing relations among different nations are also among the other goals of the contest. He further referred to the motto of this year's competition and said that given the developments in the Gaza Strip, the motto was chosen to be "One Book, One Ummah, Book of Resistance". The poster of the contest also includes a diamond whose tip is red, symbolizing resistance groups that launched the Operation Al-Aqsa Storm against the Israeli regime, he added. According to Majidimehr, rep-



representatives from Palestine will visit Iran during the competition and symbols of resistance will also be showcased at the venue of the international event. The contestants will have a meeting with the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, he added. As for the number of contenders, he said Qur'an memorizers and reciters from 110 countries registered for the competition

and after the preliminary round, 69 contestants from 40 countries made it to the finals. Majidimehr also thanked the Iranian Foreign Ministry, Al-Mustafa International University, Islamic Culture and Relations Organization and other bodies that have contributed to organizing the Qur'anic event. The event opens today and will run through February 21.

Health tourism revenue increase by \$1b: Minister

Social Desk

Iran's Health Minister, Bahram Einollahi said that annually, one billion dollars in revenue enters our country through health tourism. Einollahi made the statement during the 17th International Exhibition of Tourism and Related Industries, held at the Tehran International Exhibition Center, ISNA wrote. Einollahi explained, "We are witnessing the highest number of health tourism visits from countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, with one million and 200 thousand health tourists visiting our country in the past year, from 64 different nationalities." The minister said an increase in permits from 130 to 280 centers, showcasing the country's commitment to developing its health tourism sector. Einollahi emphasized that neighboring countries, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Oman, Bahrain, Armenia, Tajikistan, and those in the

Persian Gulf region, are the primary contributors to the influx of health tourists to Iran. He noted that the Iran's "healthcare infrastructure" makes it a preferred destination for medical treatment. He highlighted the strong interest of neighboring countries' citizens in seeking medical treatment in Iran due to its status as the region's healthcare hub. Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Oman, Bahrain, Armenia, Tajikistan, and Persian Gulf nations, are the main countries whose people travel to Iran for receiving health services.

